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ABSTRACT

A survey of 1,300 school administrators and 441 school psychologists examined perceptions of the causes of dropping out (891 administrators returned usable surveys for a response rate of 71.8%; the school psychologists' sample was part of a larger study that had yielded a response rate of 57%). Using a 5-point Likert scale, respondents rated 42 items on two questions: whether the item contributed to dropping out and whether enough research had been conducted to resolve that aspect of the dropout problem. Overall, the cause of dropping out ranked highest by school administrators and school psychologists was a dysfunctional or unstable family life, followed by lack of hope of graduating, substance abuse, emotional problems, alienation from school, parental problems, illiteracy, frustration, child abuse, and truancy. Males were more likely to identify causes related to parental and community support, while females identified causes that resided in the treatment of the child (educationally, socially, or economically). School administrators tended to choose items related to family and community over school-related items. School psychologists tended to believe dropping out was related to lack of money or parent support. Few differences emerged among rural, urban, and suburban groups. Rural respondents were more likely than others to cite conflict with teachers as a contributing factor. (SV)

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THE DROPOUT PROBLEM AS PERCEIVED BY SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS AND ADMINISTRATORS

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Some would claim that dropping out of school is a social as well as an educational problem, damaging the structure and framework of a democratic society by excluding certain children from education. Some schools still discharge their "bad apples" with relish (Fine, 1987). We have not come very far from the time when pregnant girls were expelled from school and not allowed to return. It seems as though the educational system can be used by school personnel to encourage or discourage dropping out of school. It appears that a better understanding of the beliefs of those making decisions about students at-risk for dropping out might help explain why the dropout problem is so persistent. What do school psychologist and administrators believe is at the root of the dropout problem?

Numerous studies have investigated the many perspectives of the dropout problem. The authors have been variously involved in some of this research. For example, Hyle, Bull, Salyer and Montgomery (1992) investigated the perceptions of superintendents and school principals; and Bull, McIntosh, McBee and Salyer (1992) investigated the priorities believed by school psychologists to be most crucial for the dropout problem. In each of these studies the focus question has been the definition of "the dropout" from the perspective of the kind of service provided. Each of the studies utilized the same instrument to gather data. Because of the similarity in research methodology, the purpose of the present study is to compare the perceptions of the two groups of school personnel regarding the dropout problem.

A recent review of the school psychology literature for studies related to the school dropout problem (McIntosh, Bull & Salyer, 1992) identified only seven articles. The larger review of literature revealed an existing data base on dropouts of 865 papers (Bull, Salyer, Montgomery, 1990). There are indications that administrators in the school environment, principals, superintendents, and central office administrators, have differing perceptions of the causes of the dropout problem (Montgomery, Bull, Hyle & Salyer, 1990; Salyer, Montgomery, Hyle & Bull, 1991). In addition, preliminary studies indicate that administrators from rural, urban or suburban areas have different perspectives about the reasons students are dropping out of school which may be related to their respective environments (Bull, Montgomery, Hyle, & Salyer 1991a, 1991b; Hyle, Bull, Salyer & Montgomery, 1990).

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Method

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was created by Bull, Salyer & Montgomery (1990). The scale contained 42 items to which two Likert-like responses were made using a Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree 5-point scale. One response required opinions about whether or not the item

was a factor contributing to dropout and the other required the respondent to report whether or not enough research had been conducted to know how to resolve the problem. These items were created from a list of variables extracted from an extensive review of the literature. Over eight hundred abstracts were analyzed for the focus problem or resulting issue related to dropout. The list of variables were put into categories because they were conceptually similar in some way. The list was abstracted to represent the full range of reasons found dropout problems. Items were read by at least three researchers for clarity and representativeness, deleting redundant items. The resultant list was the 42 items used on the instrument.

Subjects: Administrators

The subjects for this section of the study were randomly selected principals (initial sample 650) and superintendents (N=650) drawn from Moody (1989). Thirteen hundred questionnaires were sent out. To improve the return rate two mail follow-ups were conducted after the initial mailout. A total of 933 questionnaires were returned. Of these, 891 were usable. This yielded a return rate of 71.8%. The sample contained 752 males and 119 females. They averaged 10.7 years in administration and 12.3 years in teaching. In terms of education, 417 held BA/BS degrees, 191 held MA/MS/MAT degrees and 234 held Specialist or Ph.D./Ed.D degrees. The schools, in terms of socioeconomic status were (when these data were reported) 19 upper class, 583 middle class and 121 lower class.

Subjects: School Psychology

The school psychology sample was composed of 326 school psychologists, 71 supervisors of school psychologists, and 44 coordinators of school psychological services who were listed in the Directory of Nationally Certified School Psychologists (NASP, 1989). This sample was part of a larger study reported by McIntosh, Bull and Salyer (1992) with a response rate of 57% following the initial survey and two mail follow-ups. As is typical in survey research, some respondents did not respond to all items; therefore, not all of the totals produce the same additives.

The sample was composed of 245 males and 199 females. Their education levels were as follows: 175 MS/MA, 158 specialist, 113 Ph.D./Ed.D. They were located in rural areas (n = 102), urban areas (n = 150) and suburban areas (n = 162).

Results

The scores from each of the items on the instrument were compared in three ways: across the two values of gender, across the two study groups by training area (school psychologist or school administrator) and across the three areas of respondent location of rural, urban and suburban. These comparisons were made using analyses of variance and are reported in Table 1. The reader will notice Table 1 includes the means for all of the items and for each comparison.

An examination of the overall means for the items show that the following causes are those items with which respondents most highly agreed to be a contribution to the dropout problem (rank ordered from high to low with the mean in parentheses):

dysfunctional/unstable family (1.66)

no hope of graduating (1.75)

substance abuse (1.84)

emotional problmes (1.94)

alienated from school (1.98)

parental problems (2.00)

illiterate (2.06)

student frustration (2.06)

victim of child abuse (2.12,)

truancy (2.12)

Whereas, the items that received the least agreement for contributing to the dropout problem are rank ordered as:

medical problems (3.60)

disctrimination (3.31)

no peer group (3.24)

peer violence (3.20)

too different from peer group (3.16)

ineligible to participate in sports (3.03)

lmulticultural dehumanization (3.01).

When we look at mean differences by gender, we see that there are differences in one-half of the items (N=21). Of these, males think the following more likely to be related to dropout causes than females: no parental support, no community support, and living on his/her own. Females endorse the following more highly than males: boredom, frustration, emotional

problems, conflicts with teachers, no hope of graduation, lack of non-college track, too old for peer group, illiterate, dysfunctional family, child abuse, poverty, crime, no day care, learning disabilities, discrimination, multicultural dehumanization, fail competency test and numerous family responsibilities.

The differences between school psychologists and school administrators are as follows: school administrators endorse the following as causes more strongly than do school psychologists: frustration, no community support, lack of non-college track, peer violence, learning disabilities, discrimination, and lack of daily attendance support. School psychologists pick the following causes of dropping out more frequently than do school administrators: need to support spouse/child, desire to earn money, conflict with teacher(s), and no parental support for education.

Differences were found by location in the following ways: conflict with teachers were a problem in rural than in suburban areas, no parental support (rural greater than suburban), too old for peer group (urban, greater than rural, suburban), illiterate (suburban greater than rural). In the rest of the items the suburban cell was higher than the others in the following cases: poverty, involved in crime, poverty, peer violence, learning disabilities, discrimination, dehumanized multiculturally.

Discussion

The value of the means overall reveals a belief from both groups that students may drop out of school because of reasons external to the school. At the same time, administrators and school psychologists perceive those dropout causes that are amenable to school influence are not thought to be the cause of the problem. This result, similar to perceptions described in other studies, is analogous to blaming the victim.

One of the most interesting findings of this study is the gender differences of opinion. Although one might predict, with stereotypical expectations, women to be supportive of the individual and men to be supportive of the institution, the differences may indicate such a trend. Males supported causes related to parental and community support. Females, on the other hand, were more likely to rate as relevant causes that resided in the treatment of the child, either educationally (such as boredom and frustration) or socially (such as emotional problems, conflict with teachers) or economically (such as poverty or discrimination). Further inspection of these data may indicate that the males are in the same group as the decision makers. The reluctance to view the dropout problem as one that can be influenced by the school system may affect how readily school programs implement programs that would effect student dropout.

The comparison between psychologists and administrators show administrators to favor those items that relate to family and community, rather than school-related items, with the exception of the lack of a daily attendance officer. School psychologists are more likely to believe the dropout problem is related to lack of money or parent support.

The comparison of rural, urban and suburban groups reveal little differences for the rural group of respondents. Although multiple problems emerge when we focus on the urban group, the one area that emerges with significance for rural areas is conflict with teachers. Perhaps this finding could be explained by a perception that rural students may leave school when they encounter difficulty with a teacher because the school may have fewer teacher choices, with a less transient faculty.

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